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Islamic Gnosis (Irfan) and Wisdom (Hikmat)

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The Concepts of 'Irfan, Sufism, Hikmat and Philosophy

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Preface

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate

In the cosmic realm, human beings are like balls released into space which have within them a hidden potential energy for flight into an infinitely sublime world. But the gravitational attraction of worldly pleasures draws them toward the depths of the material world, as a result of which they fall and become degenerate; and the selfish tendencies and Satanic temptations which have become embodied in materialistic civilizations and cultures increase the speed of their downfall.

Amidst all this, there are a few individuals and groups of people the eyes of whose hearts are open to spiritual truths and the ears of whose souls have become familiar with divine messages who have the resolution to turn aside from the pollution of their animalistic desires, who open their wings to the illuminated horizon of the angelic domain and in the course of their evolution they begin an ascent to the origin of all beauties, splendours, powers, and raptures and the infinite source of perfections, and in a word, ascend toward God.

Like balls which have bounced down to the ground, they are disillusioned with the dead-end of materialism and once again, with the same speed with which they descended, they move in the opposite direction and rise toward the sublime world. It is quite likely that this process will recur repeatedly

This reaction may be well observed, nowadays, among groups of people who have become disillusioned with corrupt Western culture and who feel within themselves a great thirst and longing for spiritual values, and wander to and fro in order to find the fountainhead of this lucid water. But, alas, most of them fall into the traps laid by sorcerers who in place of the nectar of gnosis pour the poison of perdition down their throats. They lead them from pitfall to abyss, and through a rear door to the realm of ruin and destruction.

The centrifugal motion of materialistic culture and the turn back toward spiritual culture is not merely restricted to individual tendencies. We are now witnessing movements toward Islam in all corners of the world, even in the most polluted and corrupt of afflicted lands.

These movements have been accelerated by a great Islamic revolution led by a prominent gnostic, who, taking advantage of the flourishing talents of the people, was able to gain victory over the Satanic forces in the rays of the lights of Islamic teachings.

Despite the great obstacles put in its way on all sides, it still gallops forward. But, although this is not the first time that a divine man and gnostic of the Lord has undertaken the leadership of a popular movement, it is not easy to find another example with such scope and depth and with such firmness and stability.

In any case, this phenomenon, in turn, also can be a very strong motive for the investigation of the role of spiritual tendencies, especially the role of Islamic gnosis, in the

positive and desirable changes in the lives of human beings.

Gnosis (`Irfan) in the Islamic World

From antiquity, in the Islamic world there have been tendencies by the names of gnosis (`iron) and sufism *(tasawwuf),* and from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th centuries they reached their summit in many countries such as Iran and Turkey. Today, there are various sufi sects all over the world. Similar tendencies also may be found among the followers of the other religions.

Considering this common aspect, it is natural for the question to be raised as to whether there really is any such thing as Islamic gnosis to be found in Islam, or whether Muslims have taken this from others, so that what is called Islamic gnosis is really the gnosis of Muslims, not a truly Islamic gnosis. If there is such a thing as gnosis in Islam, is this the very thing which currently exists among Muslims, or has it been subjected to changes?

In answering these questions, some have absolutely denied the existence of gnosis in Islam and have regarded it as heretical innovation to be repudiated. Others consider it to have come from outside the context of Islam, while holding it to be compatible with it. In this line, some have said that sufism is an acceptable innovation in Islam, like monasticism in Christianity. In this regard, the Glorious Qur'an states:

...وَرَهْبَانِيّةً ابْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَاهَا عَلَيْهِمْ إِلّﻻ ابْتِغَاءَ رضْوَانِ اللّهِ ...

*"**And as for monasticism, they invented it themselves; We did not prescribe it for them, except for seeking the pleasure of Allah."** (57:27)*

Finally, there is a group who consider gnosis to be not only a part of Islam, but the kernel and spirit of it which comes from the Qur'an and prophetic sunnah, just as the other parts of Islam. It is not that it was adapted from other schools of thought and trends, and the aspects common to gnosis in Islam and other religions is no reason to hold that Islamic gnosis was derived from them, just as the similarities between the religious law *(shari`ah)* of Islam and the heavenly religious laws of the previous religions does not mean that the former was derived from the latter.

We approve of the last response to the question, and we add that the assertion of the originality of Islamic gnosis is not to condone whatever has been called gnosis or sufism in Islam. Likewise, it is not just any sort of creed or conduct found among groups related to Islam that can be considered truly Islamic beliefs and practices; otherwise, Islam would necessarily be a contradictory set of beliefs with a conflicting set of values, or there would be conflicting and contradictory Islams!

In any case, with our admission of the originality of Islamic gnosis, a gnosis whose highest degree was reached by the Noble Prophet, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him and his folk, and his true successors, we do not deny the existence of foreign elements among the Muslim gnostics and sufis. Many of the views and manners of behaviour of the sufi orders are disputable.

The Concepts of 'Irfan, Sufism, Hikmat and Philosophy

Before explaining the originality of Islamic gnosis, in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding it is appropriate here to give an explanation of the terms gnosis *(`irfan)* and sufism *(tasawwuf).*

The term gnosis *(`irfan),* like another term of the same family, *ma`rifah,* [also translated as gnosis] literally means knowledge, but its technical meaning is specific to knowledge of a certain kind which can be achieved neither through the senses nor experience, nor through reason nor narration, but rather is acquired by inner witnessings and interior unveilings. Then, these are generalized to some propositions which describe these witnessings and unveilings.

Considering the fact that the acquisition of such witnessings and unveilings which depend on special exercises and spiritual discipline are also called gnosis (`*irfan*), it is known with the qualification `amali (*practical*), i.e., as practical gnosis, or the manner of spiritual wayfaring (*sayr wa suluk*), just as the propositions which describe the witnessings are called theoretical gnosis, and also, like the Philosophy of Illumination,[1] is mixed to some extent with rational argumentation.

The expression sufism (*tasawwuf*), which, according to the most likely possibility, is derived from the word *suf* (wool), meaning wearing woolen garments, which symbolizes the hard life far from comforts and hedonism, is more appropriately used for practical gnosis, as the term gnosis (‘*irfan*) is more appropriate to theoretical gnosis.

In this way, in the realm of gnosis, at least three elements can be identified. One is the specific practical instructions which are alleged to lead man to intuitive and interior gnosis and conscious knowledge by presence related to God, the Exalted, and the Most Beautiful Names and His sublime attributes and their manifestations.

The second is the specific spiritual and psychic states and traits of character, and ultimately, the unveilings and witnessings achieved by the wayfarer. The third is the propositions and statements indicating these intuitive direct findings, and even for those who personally have not travelled the pant of practical gnosis, can be more or less understood, although finding their truth and essence is specific to the true gnostics.

By attending to these explanations it becomes clear that the true gnostic is the one who follows a specific practical programme and attains an intuitive and direct gnosis of God, the Exalted, and His attributes and actions. Theoretical gnosis is, in fact, an account and interpretation of this gnosis, which, naturally, has many shortcomings.

If we are not very exact about the terminology and expand its scope we can use the term gnosis for all spiritual wayfaring which is undertaken to find the truth and attain felicity, as well as the resulting spiritual states and witnessings. In this way, gnosis will include even the kinds of gnosis found in Buddhism and Hinduism and the gnosis of some of the tribes of Siberia and the native tribes of Africa, just as the term religion may be applied, with the same sort of extended meaning to Buddhism, totemism, and the like.

Here it is appropriate to indicate the concepts of wisdom and philosophy, too.

The expression *hikmah* (wisdom), which is an originally Arabic word, means a firm and certain gnosis *(ma`rifah),* and it is often applied to practical gnosis, as the sense in which it

is used in the Glorious Qur'an (17:39).

However, in current terminology it has the meaning of divine philosophy as well as practical philosophy and the science of ethics, and in ethics itself it is used in the sense of a trait of the soul related to the use of reason, and as the mean between the extremes of cunning and stupidity.

In any case, it is not applied to atheistic philosophies or skepticism, to the contrary of philosophy which is derived from Greek roots meaning any intellectual or rational efforts to understand the problems of all existence, even if this leads to the rejection of certain and established gnosis, or even the rejection of objective existence.

The Originality of Islamic Gnosis

Anyone who attends carefully to the *ayat* of the Glorious Qur'an, the words of the Noble Prophet, and the pure people of his household, may the Blessings of Allah be upon them, all of them, without a doubt will be able to find many sublime and profound subjects in the realm of theoretical gnosis, as well as numerous prescriptions and practical instructions in relation to the spiritual wayfaring of the gnostic.

For example, we can refer to the *ayat* related to the unicity of the divine essence, attributes and actions in Surat al-Tawhid *(Ikhlas)* as well as the beginning of Surat al-Hadid, and the last *ayat* of Surat al Hashr, and likewise the *ayat* indicating the divine presence *throughout the* world of being, and His comprehension over all existents, and the existential glorification and prostrations of all creatures for God, the Exalted.

Likewise, there are *ayat* which include special prescriptions and manners which can be called the way of Islamic spiritual wayfaring, such as the *ayat* pertaining to contemplation and meditation, constant remembrance *(dhikr)* and attention, rising in the pre-dawn hours and remaining awake at night, fasting, prolonged prostrations and glorifications during nights, humility and resignation, crying and falling down when reciting and listening to the *ayat* of the Qur'an, sincerity in worship, and the performance of good deeds out of love and affection toward God in order to achieve nearness to Him and His satisfaction, as well as *ayat* pertaining to trust in God, divine pleasure, and submission before the Lord.

The points which can be found among the narrations attributed to the Noble Prophet and Pure Imams, may Allah bless all of them, and in their supplications and intimate devotions related to the above topics are uncountable.

In view of these explicit *ayat* and dear explications of the Noble Prophet and his immaculate household, May God's infinite blessings be showered upon them, two groups have gone to opposite extremes. One group of narrow minded and superficial people give a trivial and simple meaning to these *ayat*, and even consider God as having mutable states and physical ascent and descent, and they empty the *ayat* and narrations of their noble and sublime contents. These are the sort of people who generally reject the existence of anything by the name of gnosis in the Islamic texts.

Another group under the influence of various social factors have discovered and accepted some strange foreign elements from others, as a result of which they have come to believe things which one cannot consider to originate from religious texts and the contents of the divine Book and Sunnah. Rather, some of them might be in opposition to the explicit texts which are not capable of exoteric interpretation.

Likewise, regarding practice, they have invented their own rites and customs, on the one hand, or have borrowed them from non-Islamic sects. On the other hand, they believe in the suspension of duties for the accomplished gnostic.

Of course, those who have an exceptionally favourable opinion of all gnostics and sufis have given excuses and interpretations for all of these issues. But it is fair to say that at least some of these contentions do not have an acceptable justification, and we should not be so over impressed with the scholarly and spiritual greatness of some figures that we accept whatever they say or write with closed eyes and ears and confirm them, and deny others any right to criticize and inquire into their works.

Of course, it is clear that the acceptance of the right to criticize does not mean to condone unrefined or ill considered judgments, or the unfair expression of bias, nor the failure to pay due heed to positive and valuable points. In any case, one should seek what is right and true, and travel the way of justice and fairness and avoid extreme and unreasonable optimism and pessimism and seek help from God to recognize the truth and to be persistent in the way of the Truth.

It is self-evident that to observe all the issues pertaining to gnosis, sufism, wisdom and philosophy and their interrelations and each of their relations with Islam is not a task to be performed within the confines of a single article. Thus, considering the summary nature of the remarks, we shall be concerned with the most significant points, and postpone further investigation to the occasion of more extensive discussion.

Gnosis and Reason

One of the fundamental problems which is a matter of contention between the supporters and opponents of gnosis is whether reason can make any judgment about what is given through gnosis, which is supposedly acquired by interior unveilings and witnessings, or whether, for example, reason can refute some of them or not.

The answer to this question is important with regard to the fact that many gnostics make assertions which cannot be given any rational explanation. They claim that they discovered these things through the esoteric way, and that reason does not have the capacity to understand them, and naturally, that reason thus has no right to refute or reject them.

The most important subject of this kind of controversy is that of the unity of existence *(wahdat al-wujud),* which has been propounded in various forms. One is that, basically, there is nothing, has been nothing and shall be nothing but God, the Exalted. Whatever has been called other than Him, is said to be nothing more than illusions and fantasies.

Another form of this proposition is that nothing exists outside the essence of God or outside the vessel of His knowledge. In this way, a sort of multiplicity in oneness may be accepted. Another form of this claim, which is more prevalent, is that the wayfarer at the end of his journey, reaches the station of annihilation *(land*), and nothing remains of him save a name.

Finally, the most moderate form of the claim is that the wayfarer reaches a station in which he sees nothing but God, and all things fade away into God. In more exact terminology, he witnesses the fading of all things into the existence of God, the Exalted, like the fading of a weak light before the light of the sun.

In such cases, the opponents generally take advantage of rational arguments, and the proponents eventually say that these sorts of matters transcend the limits of reason. In this way they shirk the burden of the rational explanation of their claims. Considering these developments, this basic question will be posed: Are there truths about which reason is incapable of comprehending and has no right to reject?

What may be said in summary here is that although reason is concerned with concepts and the function of reason is not to recognize the truth of the objective existence or origin of any objective thing, let alone the divine exalted existence, but the positive and negative judgments of reason, when they are self-evident or may lead to self-evidence, are undeniable and through concepts may be applied to objective things.

The assumption of the error of such judgments involves contradiction. In other words, although the function of reason is not knowledge of the origins of existence, with the above-mentioned qualifications, there can be no doubt about the validity of judgments about phenomena.

As for the issue of the unity of existence, it must be said that the denial of existence of things other than God and the absolute denial of multiplicity not only imply the denial of the validity of the judgments of reason, but also involve the denial of the validity of knowledge by presence belonging to the active and passive aspects of the soul.

In this way, how can we hold that witnessings and unveilings have any validity, regarding the fact that the best evidence for their validity is their being present to consciousness? So, the unity of existence, on this interpretation, is not acceptable at all. However, we may consider an acceptable interpretation which is propounded in transcendent philosophy[2] from which it is obtained that the existence of creatures in relation to God, the Exalted, is a relative and dependent existence, and to be precise it may be said that they are the very relation and dependence, and they have no independence of their own. That which is discovered by the gnostic is this very denial of the independence of other things [than God], which they call the denial of their real existence.

Here the question may be posed in another form: Can we consider the judgment of reason prior to intuition and unveiling? In reply, it should be said that pure knowledge by presence is in truth the discovery of reality itself. Thus, it is irrefutable.

However, knowledge by presence is usually accompanied by a subjective interpretation in such a way that any distinction between them requires great care. These subjective interpretations which involve conceptual knowledge, are fallible.

What are rejected by rational proofs are incorrect subjective interpretations of observations and knowledge by pretence, not the objects of knowledge by presence themselves. In the case of the unity of existence, that which is realized through witnessings is restricted to the independent existence of God, the Exalted, which due to inattention is called true existence, according to which true existence is denied of other existents.

It is worth mentioning that the great Islamic gnostics have explicitly claimed that some unveilings are Satanic, invalid, and may be recognized through some evidence, and ultimately may be distinguished from others by placing them under the scrutiny of rational certain arguments, the divine Book and the Sunnah.

It is clear that an investigation into all the kinds of unveilings and witnessings and the types

of knowledge by presence and the ways-in which they are qualitatively reflected in the mind, the causes for the incorrectness of some subjective interpretations and the way to distinguish the correct from the incorrect, are beyond the scope of this article.

Gnosis and Religious Law

Another important problem worthy of consideration at the end of this article is the relation between practical gnosis and the precepts of religious law, or the relation between *tariqah* and *shari'ah.* A group has imagined that practical gnosis is an independent way to discover truths, to be used without regard to religious law, and that Islam either corroborates it (by acceptable innovation) or; at the very least, poses no obstacle to it.

And they have continued in this direction to the point of holding - that basically, they considered it to be unnecessary to be committed to any religion in order to reach gnostic stations, and others have considered commitment to any one of the religions, and in a more moderate form, commitment to one of the divine religions, to be sufficient.

However, from an Islamic point of view, gnostic spiritual wayfaring is not along a way independent of and aside from that of religious law; rather it is a more exact and subtle part of it. If we restrict the term *shari'ah to* the outward precepts, it must be said that *tariqah is* along with *shari'ah,* or in its interior, and it may only be realized with the observation of the precepts of *shari'ah.*

For example, *shari'ah* determines the precepts for the ritual prayer; and *tariqah* undertakes the ways of concentration and the presence of the heart in prayer; and the conditions for the perfection of worship. In *shari'ah* the performance of worship in order to avoid divine chastisement and to reach the blessings of heaven is sufficient.

However, gnosis emphasizes the purification of intentions of everything other than God. This is what is known in the language of the *Ahl al Bayt,* Peace be upon them, as "the worship of the free." Likewise, idolatry *(shirk)* according to *shari'ah is* exoteric idolatry by worshipping idols and the like; however, in *tariqah* there are more precise types of hidden idolatry and levels of hiddenness.

Having any hope in anything other than God, fear of other than God, seeking the help of other than God, and love for other than Him, if all of these are taken as fundamental and independent, and not based on obedience to the divine commands, they will be considered kinds of idolatry.

Therefore, all kinds of innovations *(bid`ah)* and arbitrary rites are not only undesirable but may be obstacles to the achievement of true gnosis, let alone the use of things which have been explicitly and definitely prohibited and forbidden.

Although it may be the case that some works may bring about transient so-called gnostic states, they do not have a good result. They may be a Satanic trap for ultimate downfall, and we should not be deceived by them. It is to be concluded that the way of Truth is the one that God, the Exalted, has stated:

فَمَاذَا بَعْدَ الْحَقّ إِلّا ﻻ الضّلٰﻼلُ...

“And what is there after the truth but error?” *(*10:32)

And Peace be upon those who follow the Guidance.

1. The Philosophy of illumination was formulated by Shihab al-Din Yahya Sohravardi (1153-1191).
2. Transcendent philosophy refers to the philosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (1571-1640).

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